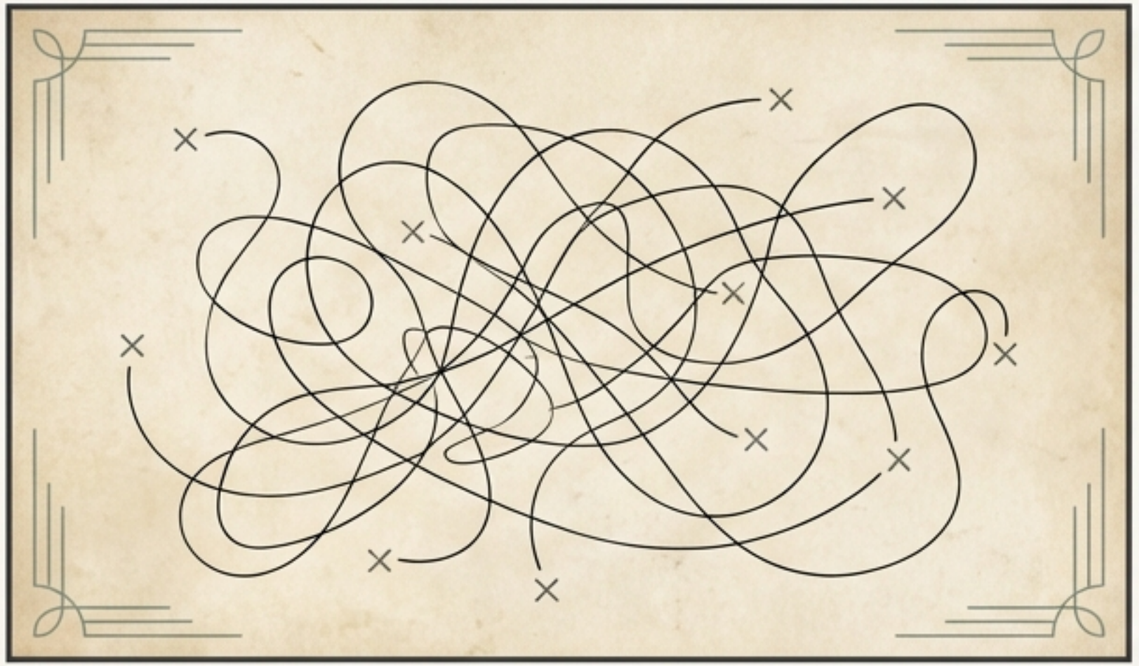

Recalibrating the Map to Liberation

A Sutta-Based View of Jhāna and Samādhi for the Modern Practitioner

Many earnest meditators grapple with conflicting teachings on jhāna and concentration. This exploration offers a clear, practical, and authentic path forward, grounded in the Buddha's earliest discourses.

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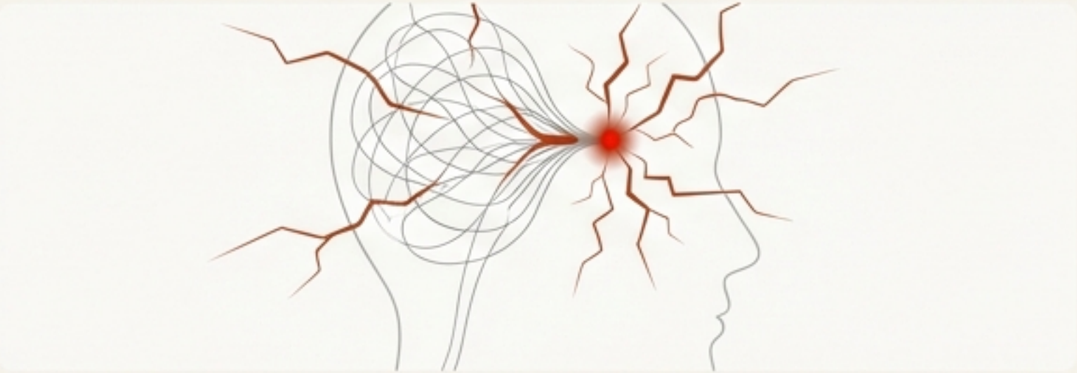
The Perils of a Flawed Map: Why ‘Concentration’ Practice Can Be Harmful

The common push for “concentration” can lead to stress, tension, and even strengthen defilements, rather than reduce them.

The Vehemence of Defilements



Ipcniemence of Defilements

“If sensual desire or aversion should nevertheless manage to invade the mind, they can manifest with surprising vehemence, owing to the increased ability of the mind to remain undistractedly with a single object…” – Āyasmā Anālayo

Case Study: The story of the woman who flew into a rage at her daughter for slamming a door after emerging from a state of "bliss."

The Stress of Effort

Author's Accounts

My Search for “One-pointedness” led to intense effort, trying to narrow my attention to a single “ticking” point, resulting only in fatigue and dissatisfaction.

Effortful “penetrative concentration” led to involuntary muscle tension, inability to walk normally, a sleep-paralysis-like experience, and ultimately needing anti-anxiety pills to sleep.

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The Foundational Error: How “Composure” Became “Concentration”

The way we translate key Pāli terms fundamentally shapes our practice. The common translation of *samādhi* as “concentration” is a primary source of confusion and stressful effort.

The Visuddhimagga View (Concentration)

Samādhi

Common translation: Concentration

Concept: Concentrating on an object. The act of fixing close, undivided attention on a single point (*ekārammaṇe*).

Practice Implication: Effort to focus, ignore distractions, and narrow the field of awareness.

The Sutta View (Composure)

Samādhi

Proposed translation: Composure, Collectedness

Concept: Concentrating the mind itself. A mind that is gathered, not scattered; put together (*samādahati*).

Practice Implication: Cultivating a stable, calm, and collected mind that is naturally clear and ready for insight.

The Danger of Wrong Composure (*Micchā·samādhi*)

“Wrong composure is not just ineffective; it can be skillfully applied to unwholesome ends. A sniper needs hyper-focus. A sociopath exhibits amazing composure to lie convincingly.” This illustrates that focus/concentration is a neutral tool, not inherently wholesome.

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The Myth of ‘One-Pointedness’: Deconstructing *Ekaggatā*

The translation of *ekaggatā* as ‘one-pointedness’ is linguistically flawed and practically misleading. It creates an artificial goal of focusing on a single, spatially-limited point.

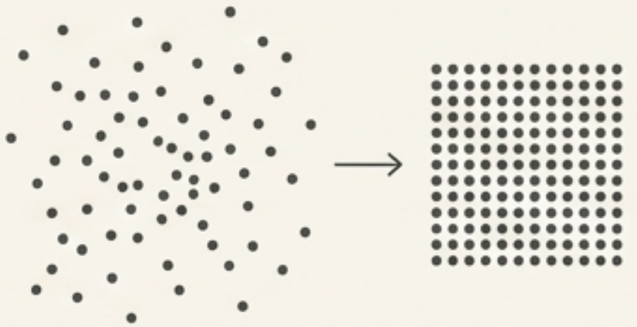
Linguistic Deconstruction

Ekaggatā

eka (one) + **agga** + *tā* (-ness)

The Flaw: *Agga* does not mean “point” in the Suttas. It can mean “tip” or “top,” but its forgotten meaning is *agāra* (place/shelter).

The Sutta Meaning: *Ekaggatā* = “one-place-ness.” This suggests a mind that is not scattered or “all over the place.”

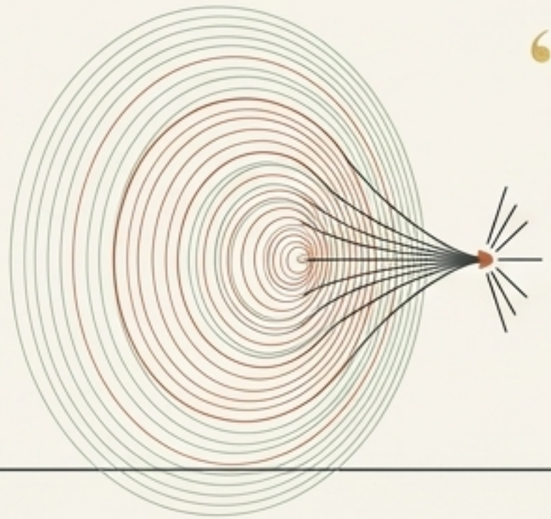


A Better Translation: Stillness

An idiomatic translation for a mind that is “one-placed” is **Stillness**.

Old View	Sutta View
“One-pointedness of mind—this is concentration.” (Feels forceful, tense)	“Stillness of mind—this is composure.” (Feels firm, relaxed, spacious)

Practical Impact



> The pursuit of a ‘point’ leads to experiences like the author’s: ‘I gradually narrowed my attention, until it was just one point… Concentrating even further… I realised that I was too tired by then, and so I gave up.”

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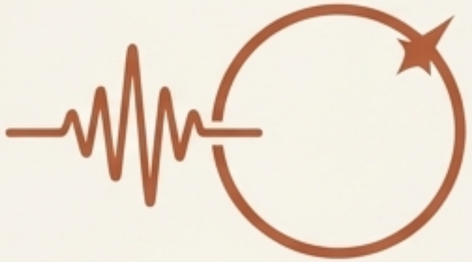
Beyond Absorption: Jhāna Is Not a Sensory Blackout

Common Misconception: Deep jhāna means cutting off the five senses, especially sound. Practice often involves seeking total silence and stillness.

Sound is Heard



Evidence

Source: Kaṇṭaka Sutta (AN 10.72)

Quote: "Sound is a thorn to the first jhāna."

Analysis: How can sound be a "thorn" or "bother" to someone who cannot hear it? This statement explicitly confirms that one *can* hear sound in the first jhāna. The goal is tolerance of senses, not their absence.

Jhāna is Possible While Moving

Evidence

Source: Venāgapura Sutta (AN 3.63)

Quote: "Then, brahmin, when I am in such a state, if I walk back and forth, on that occasion my walking back and forth is celestial... If I am standing... If I am sitting..."

Implication: The jhānas are not static, absorption states. They are qualities of mind that can be maintained through all four postures.

The Linguistic Shift: From "Entering" to "Engaging"

The common translation "enters and abides in jhāna" is misleading. The Pāli *upasampajja viharati* is better translated as **"abides engaging in meditation."** Jhāna is not a place you enter; it is an action you do.

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Recalibrating the ‘Sign’ and the ‘Joy’

Part 1: The *Nimitta* Is Not Just a Bright Light

Common View: The *nimitta* is a visual sign, often a bright disk of light, that one must attain to enter jhāna.

The Visuddhimagga's Actual Description: The text itself states the *nimitta* is not the same for all and can be tactile.

> “ ....it appears to some like a star... to others with a rough touch like that of silk-cotton seeds or a peg made of heartwood, to others like a stretched-out cobweb...”

The sign of concentration is a varied, mind-made phenomenon, not a universal visual goal.

Part 2: The Source of Joy (*Pīti*) and Happiness (*Sukha*)

Commentarial View (Atthasālinī)

Pīti: ‘delight in the attaining of the desired object’

Sukha: ‘enjoyment of the taste of what is acquired’

Source: Happiness born from *getting* a desired experience (absorption).

Sutta View

Pīti & *Sukha* of the First Jhāna are *vivekajam* (‘born of separation’).

Pīti & *Sukha* of the Second Jhāna are *samādhijam* (‘born of composure’).

Source: Happiness born from *freedom*—separation from unskillful qualities and the calm of a composed mind.

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The Core Shift: Jhāna is an Action, Not a State

The most critical misunderstanding is viewing jhāna as a static mental state to be achieved. The Suttas present jhāna as a dynamic mental action—the very act of meditating.

Evidence

The noun jhāna comes from the verb *jhāyati*, which means "to meditate, contemplate." The Buddha's command *Jhayātha*, bhikkkave is literally "Meditate, bhikkhus," not "Get into a state."

The term jhāna is used broadly in the Suttas to refer to many types of meditation, including unskillful meditation the Buddha did not praise. It refers to the act, not just a specific successful outcome.

The Noble Eight-factored Path, which includes the four jhānas (sammā·samādhi), is defined as wholesome kamma (action) that leads to the end of kamma.

"If your mind is peaceful, it's kind of like still, flowing water... where the mind is still but can develop discernment." – Ajahn Chah

From State-Getting to Cultivation

State-Oriented View: Tries to create and maintain a desired mental state. Focuses on the result. This leads to striving, manipulation, and attachment.

Action-Oriented View: Focuses on the job: to meditate (*jhāyati*). Cultivates the necessary qualities (settling and distinct seeing). The results arise naturally from the cultivation.

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The Nature of Right Composure (*Sammā-samādhi*)

The samādhi of the Suttas is not a narrow, brittle focus. It is a **wholesome quality of mind** that is **stable, content**, and **liberated**, forming the **foundation** for **final knowledge**.

Description from Ānanda Sutta (AN 9.37)

- The composure that **does not lean forward** and **does not bend back**;
- and that is **not reined in and checked by forcefully suppressing**;
- by being **liberated**, it is **steady**;
- by being **steady**, it is **content**;
- by being **content**, one is **not agitated**.

The Blessed One said that this composure has **final knowledge as its fruit**.

Key Qualities of a Composed Mind (*samāhita citta*)

- **Pliant & Malleable** (*mudubhūta*): The opposite of a mind hardened by forceful concentration. It is workable and adaptable.
- **Steady & Clear:** It is stable and provides the clarity needed for insight to arise. This is the *vipassanā samādhi* Sayadaw U Tejaniya speaks of.

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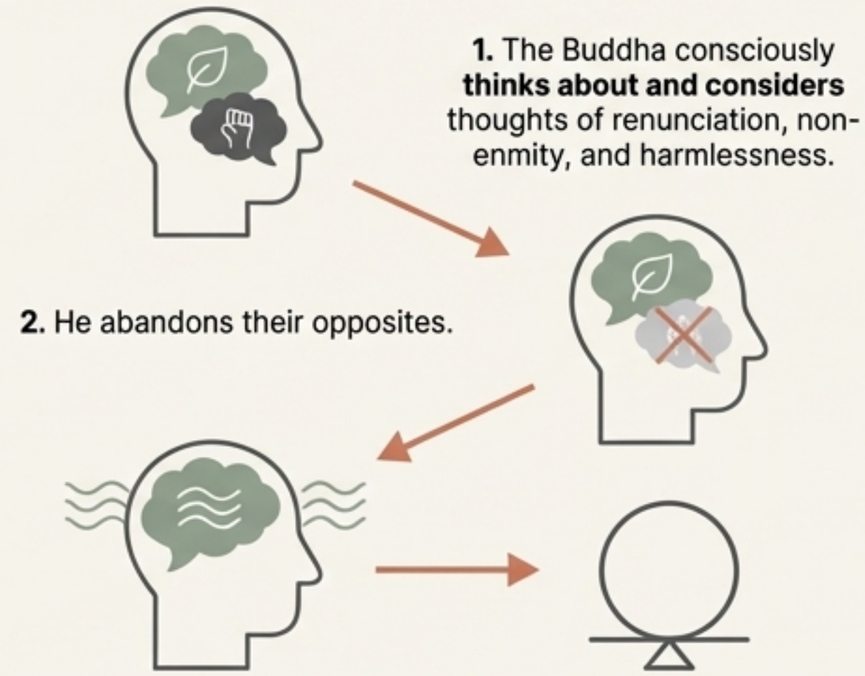
The Engine of Meditation: Wise Use of Thought (*Vitakka* & *Vicāra*)

The Common Problem: Meditators often see thinking as the enemy of meditation and try to suppress it.

The Sutta Revelation: The first jhāna is explicitly defined as being **"accompanied by thinking and considering"** (*savitakkaṁ savicāraṁ*).

How it Works in Practice


1. The Buddha consciously thinks about and considers thoughts of renunciation, non-enmity, and harmlessness.
2. He abandons their opposites.
3. By skillfully cultivating these thoughts, his "energy was aroused... mind composed, still."
4. This cultivation *directly leads* to him engaging in the first jhāna.

Redefining the Terms

Orthodox View (for Jhāna):
"Initial and sustained application of attention on an object."

Sutta View (Consistent Usage):
"Thinking" and "Considering." They are the components of internal self-talk, or "verbal fabrication" (*vacīsaṅkhāra*).

Conclusion

Skilful thought is not an obstacle to the first jhāna; it is the very method for engaging in it.

The transition to the second jhāna is the natural quiescence of this now-unnecessary tool.

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The Path of Practice: Ānāpānasati Revisited

The popular method of concentrating on the breath sensation at the nose-tip is a later, commentarial interpretation. The Suttas describe a broader, more holistic practice.

Discern Length | Sutta View

"Breathing in long, he discerns, 'I am breathing in long'...' Simply knowing the quality of the breath as it is.

Common Method

Often the first step in focusing attention on a single spot.

Experience the Entire Body

"He trains himself, 'I will breathe in sensitive to the entire body (*sabba-kāyapaṭisaṁvedī*).'"
The awareness broadens to include the whole body.

Common Method

Awareness is deliberately kept narrow and restricted to the nose area.

Calm Bodily Fabrication

"He trains himself, 'I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication (*kāyasaṅkhāra*).'" Letting go of unnecessary bodily effort and tension; relaxing the body.

Common Method

Often involves maintaining a rigid posture and ignoring bodily sensations.

The Complete Practice

The full 16-step practice continues with experiencing joy, gladdening the mind, and contemplating impermanence—all while breathing.

Common Method

The goal is to deepen concentration on the breath sign (*nimitta*) to achieve absorption.

Sutta ānāpānasati is a comprehensive training in mindfulness and composure using the breath and body as a foundation, not a technique for absorption.

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Two Pathways to Right Composure (*Sammā-samādhi*)

Source: Bhikkhunupassaya Sutta (SN 47.10), as detailed in Appendix 14.

Pathway 1: Cultivation After Having Set (*Paṇidhāya bhāvanā*)

When to Use This

When the mind is hindered. The Sutta identifies three conditions: "a burning in the body," "mental sluggishness," or "the mind is scattered outwardly."

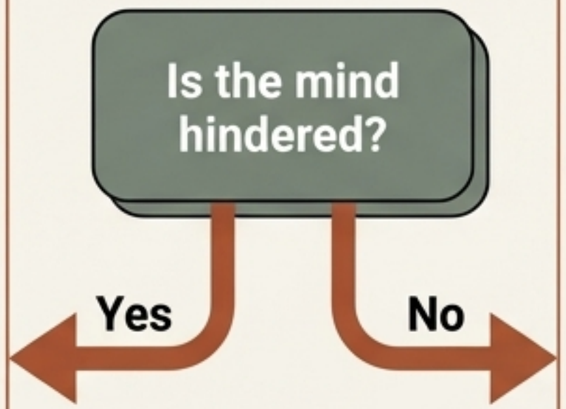
The Method

Intentionally set the mind on a "brightening basis" (*pasādanīye nimitte*).

Examples: Recollection of the Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha; contemplation on generosity, good conduct, or even unattractiveness (for passion) or friendliness (for aversion).

The Goal

To generate gladness (*pāmojja*) and joy (*pīti*), which calms the body and composes the mind, leading to the first jhāna. Once composed, one can withdraw the specific basis and return to broader awareness.



Pathway 2: Cultivation Without Having Set (*Appaṇidhāya bhāvanā*)

When to Use This

When the mind is naturally clear and unhindered.

The Method

Abide in open awareness, practicing the four establishments of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*). The mind is "unconstricted, liberated, unset."

The Goal

This practice, which includes both *samatha* (settling) and *vipassanā* (distinct seeing), naturally leads through the jhānas and towards the stages of awakening.

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Reconciling the Traditions: A Guide to Confusing Terms

Much of the complex terminology around jhāna arose from post-canonical **attempts to reconcile the Visuddhimagga's absorption model with the Sutta's path.** Once we **differentiate the two types of** jhāna, this complex scaffolding becomes unnecessary.

Sukkha·vipassaka (Bare-Insight Worker)

Commentarial Problem

How can one be an Arahant without (absorption) jhāna?

Sutta Solution

This person simply practiced the Sutta jhāna (a necessary part of the path), not the optional Visuddhimagga jhāna (absorption). The contradiction dissolves.

Vipassanā Jhāna

Commentarial Purpose

A term created to explain how "insight meditators" could be practicing a form of jhāna. It refers to a "close and firm jhāna on the characteristics" (*anicca*, *dukkha*, *anatta*).

Sutta Equivalent

This is not a separate *type* of jhāna. It is simply the practice of *vipassanā* (distinct seeing) *while engaging in* the Sutta jhāna, as described in texts like the Jhāna Sutta (AN 9.36).

Supramundane Jhāna (*Lokuttara Jhāna*)

Commentarial Purpose

A concept created to assert that the *sukkha·vipassaka* does, in fact, attain jhāna—but only at the moment of awakening itself.

Critique

This is a problematic patch that raises more questions than it answers (e.g., Why isn't this in the Suttas? Why is jhāna part of the *path* if it's only a *result*?). It is unnecessary when the two models are properly distinguished.

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A Practical Question: Can Defilements Arise During Sutta Jhāna?

The Opposing Views

Absorption Model Answer: No. In absorption, all defilements are temporarily suppressed.

Sutta Model Answer: Yes, subtler defilements can and do arise. The key is how they are experienced.

The Role of Viveka

The first jhāna is “born of separation (viveka)” from unskillful qualities.

“It's like holding a big umbrella to protect yourself from the rain. Just because you don’t get wet doesn’t mean there's no rain.”

The Experience: The meditating mind feels a distinct separation from the defilements. They can still occur, but the observer is not "dis-eased" by them, making it easy to examine them objectively.

Evidence from Practice

Āyasmā MahāMoggallāna’s Experience (SN 40.1): While engaging in the first jhāna, "perception-cognitions associated with sensuality" beset him, causing him to fall away from the state until the Buddha intervened. This shows defilements can not only but be powerful enough to disrupt the jhāna.

The Meditator's Reality: Subtle forms of ego (*māna*), own-self view (*sakkāya·diṭṭhi*), and desire can be observed while the mind is highly composed. This is the fertile ground for insight.

Sutta jhāna doesn't eliminate defilements; it creates the ideal, stable platform from which to see them clearly and uproot them with wisdom.

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The Ultimate Litmus Test: How to Evaluate Your Own Practice

Instead of relying on tradition, scripture, or teachers alone, the Buddha advised us to **know for ourselves** based on the results.

The purpose of the path is the "remainderless fading & cessation... of craving."

Your Personal Checklist

Ask yourself honestly, "Does my practice lead to..."

The Three Poisons

- [ ] Less **passion**?
- [ ] Less **aversion**? (Less anger, fear, hurt in similar situations?)
- [ ] Less **delusion**? (Less jealousy, conceit, stubbornness, attachment to views?)

The Eight Criteria (from Saṅkhitta Sutta, AN 8.53)

- [ ] 1. ...to **dispassion**, not to passion?
- [ ] 2. ...to being **unfettered**, not to being fettered?
- [ ] 3. ...to **shedding**, not to accumulating?
- [ ] 4. ...to **modesty**, not to self-aggrandizement?
- [ ] 5. ...to **contentment**, not to discontent?
- [ ] 6. ...to **seclusion**, not to entanglement?
- [ ] 7. ...to **aroused persistence**, not to laziness?
- [ ] 8. ...to being **unburdensome**, not to being burdensome?

Consider comparing your state of mind now versus three to five years ago. If nothing has changed for the better, or defilements have grown, it is time to re-evaluate your way of practice.

Tip

"If you can't judge for yourself, ask your close relatives and friends. They know the truth. If they choose not to say, then you know the truth."

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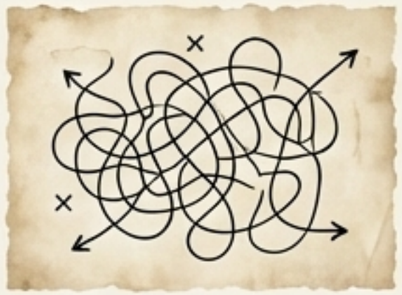
Charting a New Course: From State-Seeking to Wise Cultivation

The journey to liberation requires an accurate map. By understanding the Sutta-based view, we can shift from a stressful pursuit of states to a wholesome cultivation of qualities.



A Tale of Two Maps

The Old Map (Commentarial View)	The Recalibrated Map (Sutta View)
Goal: Attain States (Absorption Jhāna)	**Goal:** Cultivate Qualities (leading to Liberation)
Primary Tool: Forceful Concentration	**Primary Tool:** Wise Composure
Key Terms: One-Pointedness, Nimitta (as a goal), Sensory Deprivation	**Key Terms:** Stillness, Separation (*Viveka*), Composure, Open Awareness
Primary Metric: How long/deep can you sit?	**Primary Metric:** Is suffering reducing in my life?
Risk: Stress, attachment to states, spiritual bypass, strengthening defilements.	**Fruit:** Clarity, stability, and the gradual erosion of passion, aversion, and delusion.

The Suttas do not ask us to achieve extraordinary states. They guide us to perform a wise action—the action of meditation—that purifies the mind and leads, step by step, to the end of suffering. The path is the practice itself.

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